

Investigating the Impact of Tourism in Kenya



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[Photo: A giraffe lopes across the landscape in Maasai Mara National Reserve.]

Prolific wildlife and white-sand beaches bring about 780,000 foreign visitors to Kenya annually. Tourism generates an estimated US\$500 million per year in hard currency earnings, making this sector the country's single largest source of foreign exchange.

But such an influx cannot help but affect society and the environment. That's why four researchers from Moi University — with financial support from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) — recently conducted a multi-disciplinary study on the costs and benefits of tourism to Kenya, examining its impact on the economy, biodiversity, pollution, and culture. Despite growing concern that tourism was contributing to a host of cultural and environmental problems, little scientific evidence was available, explains [Paul Omondi](#), the project coordinator and Head of Moi University's Geography Department.

Information sources

The research team gathered information from some of Kenya's most visited locations: the coastal beaches around Mombasa, the game reserves of Maasai Mara, Amboseli, and Aberdares, and the tourist hub of Nairobi. They also consulted with tourism stakeholders — including hotel owners, tour operators, employees, the Kenya Wildlife Service, and government officials — and conducted research in Germany and Britain, the largest sources of overseas visitors.

Among their key findings is that the people living in and around the tourist areas receive few economic benefits from the industry. Less than 2 % of the money spent at the world-famous Maasai Mara National Reserve benefits local Maasai people. Instead, most of the money goes to luxury lodges, transport costs, and foreign package tour operators. Even revenue from park entry fees — as high as US\$27 per day — goes straight into the central government's treasury.

Minimal share

The amount that goes around to the communities living immediately around the reserves is very very minimal, says [Mark Odhiambo](#), the research team's economist. Seventy percent of people employed by park lodges are not Maasai, according to the study.

The Kenyan government has a policy stating that locals should receive one-quarter of the economic benefit of tourist sites, but the researchers found this is not being enforced. They recommend enforcing the policy, building and staffing schools and hospitals for local people, and ensuring that at least half of tourism industry employees come from local communities. About 180,000 Kenyans are directly employed in tourism and another 320,000 are indirectly employed, according to the study.

Need for consultation

The researchers also believe that nearby communities should be consulted on tourism development. There is a significant amount of resentment toward tourism in some areas, particularly where people have been denied the right to graze on land that has become a park. Local people are often disregarded or ignored in terms of policy making, says Dr Omondi. If you make people feel they are partners in decision making, it empowers them.

Tourism in Kenya is almost exclusively centred on two geographical areas: the south coast beaches and a handful of game reserves or national parks. A 150-kilometre strip of coastline north and south of Mombasa — lined with beach hotels designed for package tours — contains half of all tourism development in the country. Not only does this concentration spread the benefits (and costs) to a small area, it leaves the industry vulnerable, note the researchers. Ethnic clashes on the coast in 1997 caused a dramatic downturn in visitors, and the industry is still recovering. The researchers recommend that tourism facilities be improved in some of the less-visited areas of Kenya to help spread the impact and benefits of tourism around the country.

Impact on biodiversity

[Baraza Wangila](#), who examined tourism's impact on biodiversity, warns that Kenya's wildlife could become a victim of its own success at attracting tourists. Disruptive human presence in parks could reduce the number of wildlife, which could in turn cause a drop in the number of tourists. We should work out the carrying capacity of our parks so that animals are not put under undue threat, says Dr Wangila.

His research found that off-road driving in parks is affecting the habits of animals, that the presence of lodge restaurants is changing the food intake of birds, and that baboons are often found eating garbage. The research team also discovered traces of lead in vegetation along park roads. On the coast, tourists have driven crabs — an important link in the marine food chain — from beaches in front of large hotels and are harming the intertidal zone by crushing molluscs underfoot.

Impact on culture

Tourism has also been linked to an increase in prostitution in some areas and, as a result of their earnings, a lack of respect for traditional authorities among male and female prostitutes. Despite this, the researchers found that tourist activity can benefit local culture and the environment. They note that tourism has helped preserve some musical and dance traditions among the Maasai, prompted tourism employees to learn foreign languages, and has raised environmental awareness among people living near game reserves.

Dr Odhiambo says more can be done to encourage tourism to Kenya. We should not take it for granted. We have to package it and promote it properly. He adds that Kenya has seven tourist attachés in overseas embassies but little budget for promotion.

Recommendations

The study recommends improving tourist facilities and the country's infrastructure and dealing with the insecurity that scares some tourists away. It also recommends discouraging all-inclusive tours that leave most of the economic benefit outside Kenya.

Tourism needs to be systematically analysed and carefully managed to control negative impacts, argue the researchers, who recommend that the government establish a tourism monitoring unit. Kenya's not alone in this, says Dr Omondi, who adds that their research has implications for other developing countries that encourage tourism. To help disseminate their findings, the team has produced a documentary entitled, *Counting the Costs*.

Mike Crawley is a freelance writer currently based in East Africa. (Photo: M. Crawley)

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If you have any comments about this article, please contact info@idrc.ca.

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